White, Blue—and now Silver

The aging of the Baby Boom Generation—those born between 1946 and 1964—isn't news, although a new term for them has been coined, as more older, "silver-collar" workers choose to stay in the workforce beyond what used to be thought of as retirement age.

The past stereotype of the physically weak, older worker who was unable or unwilling to learn new skills complemented policies of layoffs and forced retirements to remove these supposedly non-productive members of the work team. Not only is research revealing the fallacy of the stereotype, but the composition of the American workforce has raised the value of older workers. The fluctuating birth rates from the 1940s through 1970s now mean declining numbers of workers between 25 and 45 and a population explosion of 65-69 year olds between 2010 and 2020 [1]. As the numbers of younger workers go down, businesses may need more of the older ones.

How can you as an employer help older workers make the most productive use of their knowledge and experience? You might think about three areas [2]:

- the safety of your physical plant - Attention to facility design and maintenance may be especially important for older workers. Falls are the #1 cause of injuries in people 65 and over [3], and while individual conditions such as arthritis may be a factor, the environment has an impact as well. Several research studies, for example, found that carrying something up or down stairs was especially hazardous and that the unevenness of the stairs was more of a factor than the worker's physical fitness [4].
- job accommodations - Ergonomic solutions can be found for age-related changes in vision, hearing, or balance. Breaks from heavy lifting or repetitive activities give older workers opportunities for stretching and movement.
- health insurance - Research shows that older workers use less sick leave and have fewer injuries than younger workers, but the injuries they experience are more severe and require longer recovery time [5]. It may be advisable to include outpatient rehabilitation services, like physical or occupational therapy, in your managed care plan. Also, illness prevention and health maintenance programs are especially important for workers prone to age-related illnesses such as cancer, cardiovascular disease, or osteoporosis.

And the attention to plant maintenance, job safety, and wellness benefits all workers, not just the "silver collar" ones.

2 - Catering to the silver-collar crowd can create a golden workplace opportunity. M Weinper, Managed Healthcare Executive. 2001 Dec; 38-41.
4 - Safety & the silver collar worker. ME Findley,JO Bennett, Professional Safety. 2002 May;47 (5).